

# DAMIEN OF MOLOKAI

## *Sermon Delivered in the Church of St Damien, Leuven, Belgium 12 March 2010*

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**M**EN AND WOMEN of Leuven, as I walk through your city I see how extremely religious you are (or were?) in every way. From houses and public buildings I see looking down at me the figures of saints and angels; even the street in which I am lodging is named after St Hubert, and there are many fine Churches in every district.

But it was not long before I was faced with a puzzle; every day as I walk to the conference from my lodging I pass the Sint-Jacobskerk. In the grounds of the Church there is a sculpture honouring one Joseph de Veuster (1840-1889). This is a fine sculptural composition, but is it Saint Damien of Molokai? I see there a tall man with aristocratic bearing, wearing an elegant and tailored religious habit. He has a noble head, with its eyes fixed upon some spiritual vision in the middle-distance. Under his cloak huddles an almost naked man, emaciated yes, but not really exhibiting any of the signs of the fatal contagion associated with Fr Damien. On his face there is only a look of distress and anxiety. Clearly European, his physiognomy is certainly not that of a Hawaiian Islander.

However, when I visited Sint-Pieterskerk, the fine Church in the centre of the city, I encountered another Joseph de Veuster who bore no resemblance to the clearly romantic sculptural composition at the Church of St James. Here was a painting of a bearded man with heavy peasant features, with a straw hat jammed on his head over glasses, with nothing aesthetically pleasing about him. Which is the real Fr Damien?

My search for the real Damien took me back to my own native city, Sydney, Australia, which, remember, is also deep in the Pacific,

though on its western side. Consequently, even as a schoolboy in Sydney in the 1940s and 50s I already knew of the Saint of Molokai. We knew of his heroic decision to minister to the lepers and somehow I knew that he hadn't been made a saint as yet, though we all believed he was one, because of his rather difficult nature and problems with authority. But Sydney, Australia, was the very place in 1890 in which the real Fr Damien was revealed and defended publicly for the first time, because shortly before he had been libelously defamed. A certain protestant minister of Honolulu, the Rev. Dr. Hyde—who strangely enough some years before had written in praise of Fr Damien—sent a defamatory letter to a colleague in Sydney, the Rev. H.B. Gage who proceeded to publish this libel in the Sydney press, a libel which was an inexplicable reaction to what it called 'the extravagant newspaper laudations, as if he was a most saintly philanthropist.' In his about face, Hyde claimed to have known the man and asserted that

He was a coarse, dirty man, headstrong and bigoted. He was not sent to Molokai, but went there without orders ... he had no hand in the reforms and improvements...he was not a pure man in his relations with women, and the leprosy of which he died should be attributed to his vices and carelessness. (2 August, 1889)

In the case of Fr Damien's besmirched reputation, divine providence was not slow to manifest itself. The agent of providence is a surprise, no less than the famous Scottish novelist, poet, essayist and travel writer, Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), who happened to be in Sydney in 1890, and who came upon the ugly message from Hyde, written in his most comfortable house in Beretania Street,

Honolulu. Stevenson had visited the leper island of Molokai after Fr Damien's death and stayed there for some eight days and seven nights. To understand Damien, we must understand Molokai. Stephenson's experience reveals both. In his reply to the Rev Dr Hyde he wrote of this experience:

When I was pulled ashore there one early morning, there sat with me in the boat two sisters, bidding farewell (in humble imitation of Damien) to the lights and joys of human life. One of these wept silently; I could not withhold myself from joining her. Had you been there, it is my belief that nature would have triumphed even in you; and as the boat drew but a little nearer, and you beheld the stairs crowded with abominable deformations of our common manhood, and saw yourself landing in the midst of such a population as only now and then surrounds us in the horror of a nightmare—what a haggard eye you would have rolled over your reluctant shoulder towards the house on Beretania Street! Had you gone on; had you found every fourth face a blot upon the landscape; had you visited the hospital and seen the butt-ends of human beings lying there almost unrecognisable, but still breathing, still thinking, still remembering; you would have understood that life in the lazaretto is an ordeal from which the nerves of a man's spirit shrink, even as his eye quails under the brightness of the sun; you would have felt it was (even today) a pitiful place to visit and a hell to dwell in. It is not the fear of possible infection. That seems a little thing when compared with the pain, the pity, and the disgust of the visitor's surroundings, and the atmosphere of affliction, disease, and physical disgrace in which he breathes. I do not think I am a man more than usually timid; but I never recall the days and nights I spent upon that island promontory (eight days and seven nights), without heartfelt thankfulness that I am somewhere else. I find in my diary that I speak of my stay as a 'grinding experience': I have once jotted in the margin, 'HARROWING is the word'; and when the MOKOL II bore me at last towards the outer world, I kept repeating to myself, with a new conception of their pregnancy, those simple words of the song—'Tis the most distressful country that ever yet was seen'.



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Stevenson was able to reveal the true Damien and to rescue him from his portrait, with its conventional halo and conventional features, the de Veuster of Sint-Jacobskerk. Well intentioned admirers did him no favour. Stephenson notes that it is 'the least defect of such a method of portraiture that it makes the path easy for the devil's advocate...For the truth that is suppressed by friends is the readiest weapon of the enemy.'

Hyde had claimed that Damien was 'dirty, coarse, bigoted, headstrong and impure'. Stephenson is prepared to admit some truth in these criticisms, but observes that, like the Pharisees before him, Rev. Hyde has actually drawn a picture of his own heart. Admitting these faults in Damien is not at all painful to the 'true lovers, patrons and servants of mankind'. They rescue us from 'substituting once for all a credible likeness for wax abstraction'.

Calling Fr Damien 'dirty, coarse, bigoted, headstrong and impure' recalls the charges leveled at someone else who was called a mere carpenter's son, who came from no-where Nazareth, a sinner, a drunkard, a blasphemer, and an associate of low-lives. But the parallel with Jesus of Nazareth goes deeper still. In the portrayal of Jesus' suffering and death, the Gospel writers grant Jesus a certain gravity, particularly when confronted by Pilate, but we must remember that the Lord had a true humanity with a psychology like to our own. Beneath that gravity the divine-man suffered a gut-churning fear as would we faced with the horror to come, yet as the Eucharistic Prayer of the Eastern Liturgy affirms, his sac-

rifice was free. 'On the night on which he was betrayed, or rather, when he surrendered himself for the life of the world'. Jesus made himself outcast and criminal, subject to utter contempt, with no way out. Damien's first night on Molokai recalls that same terrible, free sacrifice of Jesus. Stephenson takes us back to that first night, noting that

It was a different place when Damien came there and made this great renunciation, and slept that first night under a tree amidst his rotting brethren: alone with pestilence; and looking forward (with what courage, with what pitiful sinkings of dread, God only knows) to a lifetime of dressing sores and stumps... what daunts the onlooker is that monstrous sum of human suffering by which he stands surrounded. Lastly, no doctor or nurse is called upon to enter once for all the doors of that gehenna; they do not say farewell, they need not abandon hope, on its sad threshold; they but go for a time to their high calling, and can look forward as they go to relief, to recreation, and to rest. But Damien shut-to with his own hand the doors of his own sepulchre.

And when infection would come, as it surely would, he knew there was no way out.

The Rev. Hyde should recognise himself in those who mocked 'let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him'. Stephenson, however, says 'because he did what he did, I believe in him'. Let us hear the awful words of Stephenson again 'but Damien shut-to with his own hand the doors of his own sepulchre'.

The wonderful thing about Fr Damien of Molokai is that he so powerfully demonstrates how our salvation is built on our humanity but restored in the divine humanity of Jesus. Like many of the ancient Fathers, such as Ignatius of Antioch and Evagrius Ponticus, the holiness of Fr Damien warns us against perfectionism. Christianity is a religion of imperfection, and spiritual disaster awaits those pursuing a satanic perfectionism. This is what Jesus meant by the leaven of the Pharisees and the pride of Sadducees. In this Damien is truly our spiritual father and teacher. Like all true saints, his life throws up a challenge to the Church.

Damien in particular challenges the contemporary Church to embrace and love the outcasts. If the Church fails in this task, we become the Pharisee and Sadducee, preoccupied with rituals and structures, and with image, influence, and worldly status, being greeted obsequiously in the marketplace, and called Rabbi, 'But all their works they do for to be seen of men: for they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments' (Matt 23:5). Even recent scandals still have not disabused us from our preoccupation with protecting structures, image and influence.

In Mark 1:40, we read that a leper came to him, 'imploring him, and kneeling said to him, 'If you will, you can make me clean.' Jesus' wonderful and spontaneous response was 'of course I want to.' Would that the response of our Church and the Christian community was always that of the Lord. While the Church is nothing if it's not a mystery of inclusion, the sexually different and the divorced and remarried would tell us that, presently, exclusion seems to be what we do best. Somewhere here we hear Jesus' denunciation that 'My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.' (Matt 21:13).

To be practical, where can I serve, however humbly, the mystery of inclusion revealed by our Saviour and his true disciple, St Damien of Molokai? Stephenson helps us here, noting that 'We are not all expected to be Damiens; a man may conceive his duty more narrowly, he may love his comforts better; and none will cast a stone at him for that.' Rather, we imitate him in the little circle of daily life, in our relationships with those that God puts in our way, beginning, of course, with the family and the little acts of love that it demands.

Stephenson's final words to Hyde are both terrible and inspiring. He wrote

Well, the man who tried to do what Damien did, is my father...and the father of all who love goodness; and he was your father too, if God had given you grace to see it.

So let us make him our Father, but let it be the real Damien, icon of Christ, our Master.